



Remembering an influential

Artist John Craxton - who wandered in war-time East Anglia and later found a peaceful paradise in Greece - is set for a posthumous Aldeburgh exhibition and a talk by Sir David Attenborough. His biographer IAN COLLINS charts his charm

ELEVEN years ago in London, at the crowded wake for Southwold-linked artist Prunella Clough, I found myself squashed against a figure of legend. This was John Craxton.

At 21 he had been the great - brilliant, handsome, life-and-soul-of-the-party - hope of war-time British art. But he had always wanted out.

Surveying the flowing white hair, wild moustache and glintful eye in this image of an elderly Cretan chieftain, who even sported a shepherd's stick and woven rucksack, I said: "Good grief! I thought you were...in Greece."

Actually, I had somehow imagined him ascended to another kind of Arcadia presaged in his joyful paintings and the ballet sets he designed for lover Margot Fonteyn.

Rumour had it that Craxton had long since vanished into a Greek idyll. But he came and went, mostly below the radar of an art world he had good reason to scorn.

We went off to the French pub in Soho where he had drunk since 1941, and then to a meal in Chinatown. And so began almost a decade of making merry.

Like many another art writer, I begged to write his biography (while secretly keeping notes from our first meeting). He refused. Hating a slim book from 1948, he had spurned intrusion and hack analysis ever after. Why ruin a friendship?

He changed his mind following a brush with death and my 2005 Making Waves account of artists in Southwold for which he had been a key informant.

We then worked happily together on the picture-led book he wanted, to be published for his 90th birthday, in October 2012. He said I could write the full biography once he was "out of the way".

Alas, John died 18 months ago and I am his art executor. The book published this week is his first memorial.

We have just had four launches in London - a preview at Christie's, and then receptions around exhibitions in Tate Britain, Mayfair's Osborne Samuel gallery and Heywood Hill's Bookshop in Curzon Street. The shows go on.

Being charming, John had a charmed collection of friends. One was Sir David Attenborough - whom I asked to speak at his memorial service and on the Radio 4 Last Words programme (an early call since he was off to Australia that afternoon).

He introduces my book (our meetings plotted between his trips to Africa and the North Pole) and this week presented a Craxton profile on BBC2's The Culture Show.

We will be talking in Aldeburgh's Jubilee Hall on June 16 during a festival show in The Red House of pictures owned by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears and others borrowed from a London private collection.

So: why our obsession with John Craxton? Well, he painted pleasure and lived it, too. He had a matchless love of life.

He had great luck always, and the first was with his musical, Bohemian parents. They raised six children and numerous waifs and strays in a chaotic haven next to Lord's cricket ground.

The future novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, sharing a tutor with John at one point and now living in Bungay, says: "They were happy and, like pollen, some of this rubbed off on anyone who came in contact with them."

One school chum's father was Eric Kennington, and John was part of the party lent a Walberswick house in the summer of 1937 as a token of thanks for the sculptor's fine memorial to artist Arthur Dacres Rendall in the churchyard.

Seventy years later John could recall with perfect clarity the reasons for their delight in Southwold's painted rood screen.

Another school pal's dad took him to Paris to see Picasso's newly-painted Guernica and then, early in the war, a lodger introduced him both to patron Peter Watson and a mercurial young painter called Lucian Freud (fresh from the Cedric Morris and Lett Haines East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing in Dedham).

For more than two years Peter Watson funded their studios in a St John's Wood maisonette. The close friends became fantastically inventive draughtsmen.

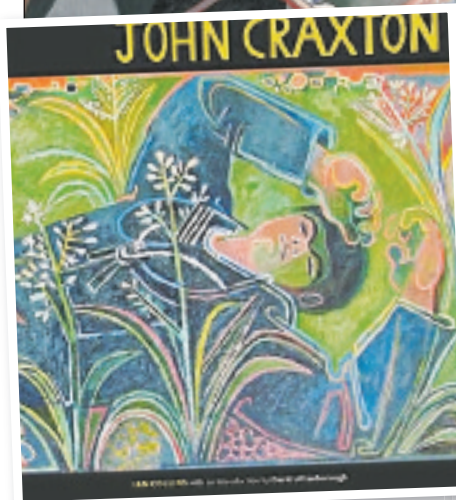
John's dashing eldest brother was a test pilot for Spitfires, and during the war John and Lucian stayed in the Fens with the family of Joan Bayon, one of brother Tim's girlfriends.

Along nearby dykes John spied the gnarled and twisted forms of pollarded willows, which he then depicted both as tormented monsters and hiding places for lost boys.

Joan's father was a scientist who received parcels of beastly corpses for post mortem. The two young artists worked on portraits of the contents - John's ravishing images like those of a latter-day Durer.

From Cambridgeshire he wrote to his friend and patroness E.Q. Nicholson: "The willow trees are nice & amazing but I would prefer an olive tree growing out of a Greek ruin..."

Spotted at the Leicester Galleries - one of the few in London to stay open during the war - John was invited to



IN SEARCH OF PARADISE: Clockwise from top: Pastoral to P.W.; Margot Fonteyn and John Craxton, Greece 1951; Ian Collins' book on John Craxton

Photographs: IAN COLLINS

produce pen-and-ink and lithographic decorations for what became a celebrated book.

Visionary Poems and Passages or The Poet's Eye, an anthology chosen by Geoffrey Grigson, was published by Cowell's of Suffolk in 1944. John worked on the plates to the very last minute in the Ipswich printshop.

That landed him with the label of a Neo-Romantic artist, recreating the world in his own anxious image. But there was nothing Neo about him: here was the complete individual and original.

Mentored by Graham Sutherland and John Piper, his influences moved from Samuel Palmer and William Blake to Miro and Picasso. He finally met the latter in Paris in 1946 - the year of his liberation.

At a dinner party in Zurich (where Peter Watson had got him an exhibition), he met Lady Norton, wife of the British Ambassador in Athens, who was seeking provisions abroad in a borrowed bomber.

They bonded at once and the return flight carried an extra passenger. The not-quite-stowaway never looked back.

After travels all over the Aegean (and extended stays on Poros and Hydra), he settled in an ancient Venetian house in Crete, on the harbour at Hania, in 1960.

Returning to London for regular, sporadic and then rare exhibitions (also bringing his Greek pictures to life in set and costume designs for Daphnis and Chloe, a 1951 ballet by Suffolk's Frederick Ashton starring

the beloved Margot), he was really ever after an Englishman abroad.

Even if produced in his North London bolt-hole, his scintillating linear paintings celebrated a southern paradise - of cats, goats, drinking and dancing and sleeping sailors, light, heat, colour, rocky landscape and the survival of mythology in everyday existence. For these blissful works he drew on both a revitalised Cubism and Byzantine mosaics.

Sour critics who found his mature art too sunny, decorative, playful and altogether too gay suggested the envy of people left off the guestlist for a life-long party.

An enforced break from Greece during the dictatorship of the Colonels brought African

art giant and a lover of life



WILD LIFE: Lion Drinking, 1970, left. Above, Hare in a Larder, 1943.

wanderings. A 1970 image of an old lion at a Kenyan watering hole was bought by singer Peter Pears, Benjamin Britten's partner. It now hangs in a ground-floor study at The Red House in Aldeburgh, which the composer of the opera *Death in Venice* used when he could no longer climb the stairs to his former workroom.

In fact, Pears had been buying Craxton's since 1950, amassing portraits of Greek dancers and shepherds, as well as haunted wartime landscapes.

Looking at these works it is easy to see why the artist wanted to escape from cold, grey, conflicted and constricted England – as is the sense of exhilarated freedom later conveyed to those he left behind.

■ Craxton pictures can be seen in The Red House, Golf Road, Aldeburgh, June 11-26 (open 2.30-5pm daily) and at Tate Britain until October 9.

Tickets for the June 16 Aldeburgh talk *The Quest for Craxton* by Sir David Attenborough and Ian Collins are available on 01728 687110.

Ian's John Craxton book, introduced by Sir David and with 240 images, is published by Lund Humphries at £35. But it is on offer to our readers until June 30 at £28 including postage. Call Bookpoint on 01235 827730 (ashgate@bookpoint.co.uk) and quote code L11ELU20.

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HAPPY WANDERER: Self portrait, above. Left, Two Greek Dancers, 1951.